

### **Ethics of “Taste, Ties and Time”**

In the paper titled “Taste, Ties and Time”, a group of researcher made a dataset of almost 1700 Facebook profile information available to the public upon request. These profiles are of an entire cohort of undergraduate students from a university of the United States. Because of the amount of personal information it contains and the fact that some people were able to re-identify the university and students, many critics have raised ethical concerns for this project. I would like to discuss its ethics according to Salganik's four principles of ethical research: respect for persons, beneficence, justice and respect for law and public interest.

Firstly, researchers of this project have not shown sufficient respect for persons. Before this project was initiated, researchers only asked for the permission of Facebook and the university of these subjects. They have also asked the university to provide additional data on these students in order to “link each Facebook profile with an official student housing record” (Lewis, Kaufman, Gonzalez, Wimmer, Christakis 2008). In other words, none of the owners of these profiles were informed about this project; not to mention that their authentic personal housing information were released by the school to help link their profiles with their housing records. Even though informed consent could potentially affect the results of a study in certain situations, it may not have considerable effect on this one. Unlike other studies of human behavior where subjects could easily behave differently, data involved in this project are profile information and friend connections that are less likely to be altered after giving consent.

In defense of their integrity, researches involved in this project argue that the profile information is publicly accessible through Facebook. They wrote in the dataset's codebook that "only those data that were accessible by default by each RA were collected, and no students were contacted for additional information "(Lewis 2008). To clarify, they hired research assistants from the university to manually search for each first year student on Facebook and save their profile information. Though this argument may seem plausible in the first sight, the peculiarity of this way of collecting information could potentially undermine respect for persons. Since these RAs use their own Facebook accounts to open home pages of these subjects, whether these accounts are "public" or "private" for them to view depends both on the privacy settings of these subjects' accounts and whether the arbitrary RA and certain subject are Facebook friends. Generally, whether a subject's account is "public" or "private" can be determined differently among RAs. There's a great opportunity that a "private to public" account is considered as "public" only because the RA and the user are friends on Facebook. Another potential situation is that some subjects' accounts are set as "private to public" but "public" to people from the same university. Since RAs are either undergraduates or graduate students of the same university as the subjects, both of these two situations are very likely to happen. Researchers should have anticipated these two scenarios where subjects' will is not sufficiently respected. Thus, even though IRB has reviewed and approved this research, it is possible that the review board is not entirely aware of these potential threats due to unfamiliarity with Facebook.

Secondly, researches have attempted to honor the principle of beneficence within their ability, but there still is room for them to improve. Instead of making the dataset entirely public, the researches required people to sign terms of use before getting the data. In this statement, they

explicitly wrote that users can “produce no links among the Authors datasets or among the Authors data and other datasets that could identify individuals or organizations” and “not knowingly divulge any information that could be used to identify individual participants in the study, nor will (I) attempt to identify or contact any study participant, and I agree to use any precautions necessary to prevent such identification” (Lewis, 2008). These sentences clearly show their concern of the privacy issue and determination to protect the subjects. They have also delayed the release of subjects’ “cultural fingerprints” to protect them from identification. Though one could argue that a delay in release is far from sufficient, in fact, the researchers never released this cultural information. What’s inadequate is authors’ prediction of the public’s ability to re-identify subjects from pieces of information. They did not realize that only removing the names and student identification number is not enough to keep these subjects anonymous. Nevertheless, this negligence is understandable since the research is only published in 2008. It is common for people to underestimate the power of random pieces of information at that time. Thus, authors have indeed attempted to maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms in this research.

Thirdly, justice is also held in this research. All members of the cohort are included in the study, and none of them are treated differently because of their sex, race or ethnicity.

Lastly, the research does show respect for law and public interest, but authors should also take a step further to effectively protect subjects’ privacy in the era of internet. With permission from Facebook and the university, the researchers have legally gathered the data. According to the California law, “personally identifiable information” is defined as “an individual’s name or other

personally identifiable elements such as a social security number, a driver's license number, or a credit card number" (Zimmer, 2010). Hence, it is sufficient for the authors to remove this information from the dataset. However, there is considerably high informational risk in the era of Internet. Due to the ease of accessing information from the Internet, some people can easily piece together random bits of information. If people combine the ethnicity group information of an account with its housing record, this account could be re-identified. Hence, only obeying the requirement of the law is not effective to protect the privacy of these subjects. Since the public is only interested in learning from study results without hurting anyone, authors should avoid releasing too much personal information to best respect their interest.

In short, researchers involved in this project have met minimum requirement of the principles of beneficence, justice and respect for law and public interest; however, they have not show enough consideration of respect for persons. Nevertheless, if the dataset is made available, I would still want to use it in my research. I would try to get the consent from the subjects and remove all information of the ones who refuses. After getting their consent, I believe that doing analysis on the data itself will not do much harm to the subjects as long as detailed information of individuals is not made public.

**Work cited**

Lewis, K., Kaufman, J., Gonzalez, M., Wimmer, A., & Christakis, N. (2008). Tastes, ties, and time: A new social network dataset using Facebook.com. *Social networks*, 30(4), 330-342.

Zimmer, M. (2010). "But the data is already public": on the ethics of research in Facebook. *Ethics and information technology*, 12(4), 313-325.